Comment: *Women in Philosophy*

Women have only recently been in a position to make a difference in philosophy and theology, in the West, and to have professional careers in these disciplines. Search as one may, down through the history of philosophy, it is next to impossible to find a single great philosopher or theologian whose work was affected in any way even by conversation with a woman.

According to Plato's account, in *Phaedo*, for example, Socrates refused to allow his wife Xanthippe even to remain in the room during his last conversation with his disciples and friends ('Crito, someone had better take her home').

That was in 399 BC. It took another 800 years before a woman emerged as a philosopher in her own right. Hypatia (c.375–415), daughter of a mathematician-philosopher in Alexandria, lectured on philosophy in her native city and ultimately became the recognized head of the Neoplatonic school there (by about 400 AD). Said to be beautiful as well as intellectually gifted and trained, she attracted many students, including Synesius (five years older than herself) who was to become Bishop of Ptolemais. Some of his letters to her are extant. He did not live to hear of her barbarous murder. Shortly after the famous theologian Cyril succeeded his uncle as Patriarch of Alexandria, Hypatia was dragged off the street by a mob of his supporters, led by a certain Peter the Reader, into a church, where she was stripped naked and battered to death with oyster-shells. Though bearing no direct responsibility for this outrage, Cyril campaigned so virulently against Neoplatonism, as well as Novatianism, the Jews, and the Imperial prefect, Orestes, that he certainly created the climate of fanaticism in which she could be so brutally treated. We know that she wrote works on philosophy and mathematics, of which nothing remains. Her story forms the basis of Charles Kingsley's historical romance (1855).

Skipping to the beginnings of modern philosophy, and to René Descartes (1596–1650), there is a happier story to tell. All his life, from his early education at a Jesuit college onwards, he exchanged ideas with a wide range of friends, often by letter, over the many philosophical and theological topics with which he was concerned. Two — royal — women played a significant part in his life.

Well, perhaps more in ending his life in the case of Queen Christina of Sweden (1626–89). Succeeding her father before she was six, she was given a boy's education: languages ancient and modern as well as philosophy. On her eighteenth birthday she took over the direction of the country, continuing her father's interest in founding schools. She also sought to encourage learning by importing foreign scholars. She left some jottings, in French highly praised by Descartes. His big mistake was to

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accept her invitation to go to Stockholm to teach her. He was never good in the early morning; even his Jesuit schoolmasters let him lie late in bed. Now his life was totally disrupted by having to leave at 4.30 a.m. to reach the palace at the time the Queen insisted on meeting him. He died of pneumonia, within six months, in what was in any case an exceptionally harsh winter. (Christina went on to abdicate, become a Catholic, and settle in Rome, where she pursued interests in Neoplatonic ideas.)

Descartes had a happier relationship with Elizabeth, Princess of Bohemia (1618–80). She was the eldest daughter of Elizabeth Stuart, the 'Winter' Queen (1596–1662), and thus a grand daughter of James VI of Scotland and I of England and his wife Anne of Denmark. In exile in The Hague, and fairly impoverished, the family was nevertheless ensured that she was well educated, as her mother was. Descartes started corresponding with her in 1643 (when she was 25). He was devastated when she left the Netherlands for Berlin in 1646. They never met again, though the correspondence went on. He dedicated two of his most important books to her. Their correspondence, principally about the emotions, shows many signs of how he reconsidered his ideas in the light of hers. (He may even have accepted the invitation to Stockholm in the hope of getting Christina to send her money; Elizabeth herself played a role in establishing Cartesian philosophy in Germany, ending her days as Abbess of a Lutheran convent in Westphalia.)

Too young ever to meet him, Anne Viscountess Conway (1631–79), an extraordinary figure in any age, was the author of one of the first critiques of his philosophy, often raising the same questions that Princess Elizabeth put to Descartes himself. Through a stepbrother at Cambridge she began, in 1650, to correspond with the Platonist philosopher Henry More (1614-87), initially about Descartes. Her husband Edward, who had been a pupil of More, shared this interest — but did not follow her into studying the Lurianic Kabbalah or into becoming a Quaker. *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy* (edited by Allison P. Coudert and Taylor Corse, Cambridge University Press, 1996), contending against Cartesian dualism and Hobbesian materialism, develops a vitalist philosophy, building on Neoplatonic and kabbalistic ideas. Far too adventurous ever to be widely read or accepted, Lady Conway is significant as a philosopher in her own right, let alone as the first woman, writing philosophy in English.

Ironically, however, the English text we now have is translated from the Latin version published posthumously in Amsterdam in 1690; the English version that appeared in 1692 was already a translation from the Latin, made by some one who seriously misunderstood her thought — Anne Conway's manuscript itself had already been lost.

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